



A Call to Civic Action
Scott Warren
Providence, Rhode Island

When Scott Warren was in 10th grade, he witnessed Kenya's first truly democratic election. "It completely changed my way of thinking," admits Scott. "It was in Kenya, for the first time, that I understood the power of democracy. I got to see how excited people were to cast their vote. For many of them it was the first vote they had ever cast in their lives that really mattered." For over 30 years, Kenya had been ruled by the Kenya African National Union (KANU), in a one party system. Until that fateful day, the people of Kenya had no say in their future.

When Scott was 8 years old his father joined the State Department. His family left their home in San Diego to experience the world. Frequent travel was part and parcel of growing up for Scott. He was constantly moving about, experiencing different people, languages, cultures, and most importantly, systems of government. By the time he was 16, he had been all around the United States and Latin America. It's been said that travel helps create a charitable mind. He credits his most formative experiences to living on the African continent.

"When you are living in a place without a democracy, things can be scary. People see that the democratic effort is towards good. But they doubt that a democracy could actually thrive, since it never had."

Scott would hold these lessons close to his heart; the main one being, democracy is fragile. This is something he wasn't taught in school when he was young, and it troubled him. Considering how important a concept this was. From that point forward, he made it his mission in life to ensure more young people in the United States were civically educated and engaged.

When Scott returned to the U.S., he attended Brown University. Here, he immediately got interested in learning all that he could about international politics on campus. By the end of his Senior year, he felt like he had the tools to start a civic movement of his own.

"A lot of young people want to make a difference, but don't necessarily see politics and local government as the best way to do so. There are a whole host of reasons for this. And people can be cynical about politics. But I think the main reason is that young people don't understand how these systems work - because we don't teach civics in schools anymore. And when we do, it's boring. It's like - how a bill becomes a law, that kind of approach."

So it made Scott wonder, how do we bring civics back to the classroom? How do we get young people excited about participating in a democracy? We need a new approach, and it needs to be action-oriented. It needs to bring young people to politics by engaging them in issues they care about. From here, while still a Senior at Brown, he co-founded with Anna Ninan Generation Citizen (GC) to ensure that every student in the United States receives an effective action-oriented civics education.

In September 2008, they had their first success in Rhode Island schools, serving 300 students. In a year, they had offices in the Greater Boston area. By 2010, they had won a prestigious Echoing Green Fellowship for their work.

"We work with high schools to ensure that students take action civics, just like they would science or math. In our curriculum, they learn about local issues, and then take real plans of action to local government. It's getting at the root cause of a problem, and addressing it through the process from start to finish," Scott adds, "But it isn't always easy."

“I organized my first event when I was 23. We were working with the Providence Public School District, and all seemed well. That is, until I realized I messed up the bus registration process – and I did. It wasn’t a small error. I was reprimanded. I felt incompetent. And more than anything, I felt so bad that an action of mine would take away any of the spotlight from these amazing youth leaders. It took me a lot of time to rebuild that relationship. But it was important that I recognized it was on me, and to get better. There was a bigger cause to serve out there.”

“GC is a great organization, but I’ve made many mistakes along the way. Going through the ups and downs is what got me where I am today.” Scott recalls another struggle he had. It occurred when he was lobbying at the state house of Rhode Island for divestment from Sudan, which was suffering from the genocide in Darfur. “While I was lobbying on the floor, a treasurer came by and said “this is a cute student project,” – they didn’t take me seriously at all. It made me feel like I was too young. Like I wasn’t going to succeed. It can be hard to push forward without support. But I learned from this experience, and applied it to GC. When you start a nonprofit, there are countless obstacles. You are always worried about having enough funds to support your cause, so you are always trying to raise funds. Because of this, you are living in a world of rejection, and you have to be able to deal with that. It’s hard too, when it seems like more people should care about the issue that you care about. Having a greater cause in mind helps.”

Scott describes the culmination of Generation Citizen's curriculum, where students really have the chance to shine. “We have a Civics Day that takes place at the end of the Fall and Spring semesters in each of our program sites. It’s kind of like a science fair for civics, where our students present their action civics projects to the community, local officials, and community leaders who bridge the gap between them. It’s a great place to see young people taking civic action.”

Scott is especially eager to lower the voting age to 16. GC has a policy and advocacy component. It tries to ensure that action civics is a need-to-have in curriculums across the nation. A major advocacy issue of GC is their push for legislation to lower the voting age to 16. Scott believes that if younger people were going to be voting, schools would be much more motivated to properly provide civics education. “Our country has dismal voter participation, especially recently,” says Scott adding, “Lowering the voting age is a necessary reform that’s needed for spurring higher voter participation, more education, and more civic engagement.”

This year alone, 30,000 students across the country have been engaged in action civics with GC. With offices in New York, Oakland, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, California, Oklahoma, and Texas, it might be easy to think Scott was an instant success. But this isn’t the case.

Scott wants young people to know one thing about themselves – they hold a great amount of power. “Every time we have seen a positive change in this country, youth have been at the forefront. Whether it was the Civil Rights Movement, or Climate Change Advocacy, the youth have led the way where others wouldn’t. So I believe it’s up to young people to build a better democracy than the one we have today.”

And he has all the faith in the world that they will. Especially when they are supported by strong adult leadership. “For too long, we’ve heard it said that young people have to wait their turn. We’ve heard that they don’t have anything valuable to add to a conversation. We’ve heard that young people should wait until they are older, when they can really understand the way things work. To this sort of thinking? Well, I would just say that we need more of the unique knowledge that young people have out there. We need to hear more of their points of view. More of their abilities to unify people. And we need to support them now, more than ever.”

In all of his work, Scott has demonstrated an amazing capacity to unify people through civic education. GC has acted as a bridge between organizations, and has brought many differing causes together. With its Community Change Fellowship, GC has funded students to partner with causes around the country. Those include YouthUprising (Bay Area), Make The Road New York, and the Boston Education Justice Alliance.

GC has countless alumni still making an impact by carrying on the tenets of civic education. In San Francisco, Democracy Coach Alumni Carmen Sobczak is educating on homelessness. In Boston, Community Change Fellow Giancarlo Castenda is informing students on injustice. And it’s probably safe to say that Scott will continue

leading young people for a long time to come through his educational programs.

Soon enough, these young people will have the tools to be civic leaders themselves. And that's really what Scott's work and messaging is about. The youth will lead us into a brighter future, and thanks to Scott, they will be the most prepared generation yet to take on the many challenges to come.

The philosophy of the school room in one generation

will be the philosophy of government in the next.

Abraham Lincoln

Call to Action: Learn more about Scott's work in helping educate young people in basic civics: Generation Citizen at <https://generationcitizen.org>. Check out his book, *Generation Citizen - the Power of Youth in our Politics* at <https://www.amazon.com/Generation-Citizen-Power-Youth-Politics/dp/1640091270>.

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